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Officials Hope for Aquino, Expect Marcos

Tomorrow's presidential election in the Philippines promises to be closer than Washington officials had expected, but they see little likelihood that President Ferdinand Marcos will relinquish his 20-year rule no matter how many votes are given to opposition candidate Corazon Aquino.

The fear is not, as some have suggested, that Marcos will invalidate the vote and declare martial law. That's not his style. Instead, even the optimists concede, Marcos will simply rig the election to make sure he wins.

Secret CIA assessments predict a close race. So a modest influx of cemetery ballots and roving multiple voters should assure a Marcos victory.

Except for the Pentagon's top brass and a small number of conservatives who believe in Marcos, the Reagan administration has made no secret of its hope that Aquino somehow wins tomorrow.

Both the pro- and anti-Marcos factions have the same strategic considerations in mind: retention of the big U.S. bases at Subic Bay and Clark Field, and elimination of communist guerrillas in the islands.

The Pentagon fears Aquino will close the U.S. bases as a sop to the leftists, and that she is too "soft on communism" to deal with the rebel threat.

At the State Department, the fear is that the rampant corruption of the Marcos regime and the economic ruin it has wrought will doom the fight against the communist rebels, who will seize power and kick the Americans out along with Marcos.

There is no disputing the fact that the misery quotient in the Philippines is high. While Marcos,

his wife and their cronies live in luxury, the mass of Filipinos have a tough time just scratching for enough to eat. The Philippines must now import rice, which it used to export.

"Sixty percent of the average Filipino family's resources are spent for food," reported a recent cable from our Manila embassy seen by our associate Lucette Lagnado. "Among poor families, up to 100 percent is being reported."

The principal victims are the very young. "Children under the age of 5, from families at the lowest end of the economic scale, continue to be the most severely affected," the embassy cabled, adding that the situation is "potentially disastrous."

One member of Congress who agrees with the State Department on the importance of solving the Philippines' economic crisis is Sen. John Melcher (D-Mont.). The farm-state senator is furious that his efforts to get more food sent to the islands were misinterpreted by State Department officials as a gesture of support for Marcos personally.

In a bluntly worded letter to Marcos, the senator reminded him of earlier meetings between the two. "I stressed the need to repair the severe economic conditions and the erosion of individual freedoms of the Filipino people," Melcher wrote.

Melcher then proceeded to castigate the Philippines president for reinstating Gen. Fabian Ver as chief of staff after his acquittal on charges of complicity in the assassination of Corazon Aquino's husband Benigno. "Your reinstatement of Gen. Ver is, to me, incredible and can only be viewed as dictatorial and despotic," Melcher wrote.

Marcos has not replied to the senator's letter.